



## THE EFFECT OF IMPLICIT VS. EXPLICIT CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON IRANIAN ELEMENTARY EFL LEARNERS' PARAGRAPH WRITING ABILITY

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### Abstract:

This research tried to compare the probable effects of two different kinds of corrective feedback (explicit and implicit) on Iranian elementary EFL learners' paragraph writing ability. The participants were 30 English elementary foreign language learners who were studying EFL at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Lahijan, Iran. They were all native speakers of Persian. The study groups both included girls aged 12 to 14. In order to make sure that all the participants were at the same English proficiency level, Face to Face Written Placement Test was organized. The pretest-posttest nonequivalent-groups design which is a subcategory of quasi-experimental design was utilized in this study. Each group included 15 participants. All of the participants in each group have expected to write a paragraph as the pretest and after treatment sessions they were required to write another paragraph as the posttest of writing. The findings showed the superiority of explicit feedback over implicit feedback during the procedure of the research.

**Keywords:** explicit feedback, implicit feedback, paragraph writing

### 1. Introduction

In second language acquisition (SLA) errors are considered as a natural component of the learning process and a sign of students' effort to produce the appropriate structure. Corrective feedback, also known as error correction or grammar correction, is a crucial factor adopted by teachers to treat learners' errors in foreign language classrooms

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(Chen, Lin & Jiang, 2016). Broadly, there are two kinds of feedback: positive and negative. Negative feedback, also known as corrective feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006), is defined as information following an error produced by the language learner. Among the types of corrective feedback used by ESL teachers, recasts are the most controversial in terms of their definition and effectiveness in L2 classrooms (Ellis & Sheen, 2006).

How students' errors should be corrected and to what extent this correction would lead to improving their knowledge is one of the chief preoccupations which can be seen among EFL teachers. Another concern relates to the method of providing students the feedback needed to foster improvement without damaging their fluency and motivation. These apprehensions arise due to problems found during error correction in the ESL classrooms. Having errors corrected can sometimes be annoying for language learners, and such corrections may reduce the students' willingness to communicate with their teachers or classmates. If teachers corrected too many errors, their students' fluency in speaking might be affected because they would fear making mistakes. Furthermore, it may affect students' confidence and performance in the learning process (Panova & Lyster, 2002).

Corrective feedback differs in accordance with the extent to which it is implicit or explicit. In implicit error correction teachers do not tell the students they made mistakes, while in explicit feedback there is an overt indication of committing errors. Implicit feedback regularly takes the shape of recast where *"the teacher first repeated a learner utterance with an error, highlighting the error through emphasis, and then, if this did not result in a learner self-correction, the teacher recasts the utterance using the correct form"* (Ellis, 2008, p. 884).

## 2. Literature Review

One of the most primary responsibilities of language teachers is providing feedback for learners. The role of feedback is of great value in most theories of second language learning and language pedagogy. Corrective feedback informs learners about their writing performance and transforms them to critical and professional L2 writers. Responding to learners' errors is one the enduring and problematic tasks for English teachers (Hyland & Anan, 2006).

Russell and Spada (2006) found 56 studies that examined the effects of corrective feedback (CF) on L2 learning. Although they concluded that CF in L2 instruction plays a helping role in improving language production, the situations and features of feedback can be varied from one instructional setting to another. Therefore, researchers have examined a variety of elements relating to CF in an attempt to better realize its function in the restructuring of the inter-language system.

In the debate between Truscott and Ferris, Truscott (2007) reflecting the opinions of teachers who stick firmly to process theories of writing, brought forward the strong claim that correcting learners' errors in a written composition may enable them to

eradicate the errors in a subsequent draft, but causes no effect on grammatical accuracy in a piece of writing (i.e., it does not result in acquisition). Ferris rejected and discussed Truscott's claim, stating that it was impossible to banish correction generally because it was depended on the quality of the correction—in other words, if the correction was clear, coherent and dependable it would help acquisition. After that Truscott claimed that Ferris failed to adduce any evidence in support of her argument. To correct or not to correct written errors, then, remains debatable, although a number of recent studies (e.g., Sheen, 2007; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008) have produced evidence to show that written CF can work with the acquisition. Reviewing literature relating to this controversy, Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 84) commented that "*it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions and generalizations from the literature as a result of varied populations, treatments and research designs*", suggesting that contextual factors affect the extent to which CF is effective.

Advocates who support grammar correction also highlight the role of strategy training in order to increase L2 learners' ability of being autonomous editors of their own writing (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 2010).

Explicit and implicit corrective feedback are two strategies of corrective feedback. In explicit corrective feedback the teacher provides the learner with the correct form. As Ferris (2006) claimed, direct feedback can take different forms such as omitting an unnecessary part of writing, adding a missing point, and writing the correct form above or near the incorrect and imperfect part. Ferris and Roberts (2001) believed that considering student writers of low levels of proficiency direct corrective feedback can have better results than indirect corrective feedback. However, a disadvantage of direct corrective feedback is the minimal role of the learner and although it can help them to produce the correct form in the revised piece of writing but it cannot cause a long term learning. However, a recent research by Sheen (2007) proposes that explicit corrective feedback can be useful in improving acquisition of certain grammatical features.

Implicit feedback happens when the teacher shows that the student has made an error in the piece of writing, but leaves it to the student to find a solution and correct the error. Numerous researchers have claimed that indirect feedback is more worthwhile to student writers in most cases because it results in cognitive engagement, reflection and problem-solving (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) although some different situations and exceptions might happen include instances in which the error that is needed to be solved by student writer is idiosyncratic or too complicated (Ferris & Roberts, 2001) or the student writers are not proficient enough to self-correct their errors even when the errors are highlighted for them (Brown, 2007; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

### 3. Methodology

The researcher benefited from the quasi-experimental design. The pretest-posttest nonequivalent-groups design which is a subcategory of the quasi-experimental design was performed in this research. A placement test, a pretest and a posttest were conducted in experimental and control groups. This study tried to compare the effect of implicit and explicit corrective feedback on EFL learners' paragraph writing ability.

#### 3.1. Participants

This study was conducted at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Lahijan, Iran. Thirty EFL young adult learners aged 12 to 14 participated in this study. They were at the elementary level of proficiency. Their native language was Persian. Cambridge Written Placement Test was administered to select the learners with elementary level.

#### 3.2. Materials

In order to have reliable and valid results in this study, the following materials were implemented.

- a. A Cambridge Written Placement Test (general English proficiency test) was used in order to determine the participants' level of proficiency and placing them in two homogenous groups. One group was known as the experimental group and the other group was considered as the control group.
- b. Since the researcher explored writing skill, participants were expected to write a paragraph which was considered as the pretest. After the treatment sessions, an identical test with a different topic conducted as the posttest. The pretests and posttests which were conducted in this study were in the form of writing paragraphs. Each session the participants were expected to write about a new subject. The topic of the writing was selected by the instructor, considering the level of the learners.
- c. EFL Essay Writing Rubric (adopted from Beare, 2017) was utilized by two raters.

#### 3.3 Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

In this research, the paired-samples t-test has used as a method of data analysis in order to analyze the procedure of development from the pretest to the posttest. Since the researcher wanted to compare two sets of scores, the paired-samples t-test was utilized. SPSS software was used to analyze the results of the experimental and the control groups.

The reliability of the pretests and posttests of writing was estimated by test-retest method through giving the writing tests to the pilot study group twice. Next, the correlation coefficient between the two sets of scores was obtained. The total score for each participant for the writing test was the average of the two raters' scores in each administration. In using test-retest method, the assumption was that no significant

change would happen in the participants' foreign language writing ability because there was a reasonable interval time between the two test administrations (two weeks).

This research was developed in five major stages: 1.selection of homogeneous groups 2.pretest 3.treatment 4.posttest 5.analysis.

The procedure of treatment continued about four weeks, two sessions each week. The participants in the experimental group were expected to write about a topic which was given to them. The paragraphs were investigated and corrected implicitly by the teacher and given back to participants afterwards. Besides writing paragraphs, the learners were required to write some sentences at home and the sentences were checked in order to enhance their writing skill. After the treatment sessions, the learners in the experimental and the control groups were asked to write a paragraph as the posttest. To facilitate the procedure of scoring, the raters have employed subjective scoring by utilizing an EFL Essay Writing Rubric.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Pearson correlation test was run to measure the correlation coefficients between the scores. The inter-rater reliability indices measured by Pearson correlation for the pretest and posttest scores of the writing were ( $r_{\text{pretest (control)}} = .996$ ,  $r_{\text{posttest (control)}} = .994$ ;  $r_{\text{pretest (experimental)}} = .957$ ,  $r_{\text{posttest (experimental)}} = .972$ ) that reflected statistically significant correlation between the scores given by the two raters ( $p < .01$ ). The results are in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Correlations for the Scores Given by the Two Raters in Pretest and Posttest of Writing

Group			Pretest of writing (rater B)	Posttest of writing (rater B)
Control	Pretest of writing (rater A)	Pearson	.996**	-
		Correlation		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	-
	Posttest of writing (rater A)	N	15	-
		Pearson	-	.994**
		Correlation		
Experimental	Pretest of writing (rater A)	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.000
		N	-	15
		Pearson	.957**	-
	Posttest of writing (rater A)	Correlation		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	-
		N	15	-
	Pretest of writing (rater A)	Pearson	-	.972**
		Correlation		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.000
	Posttest of writing (rater A)	N	-	15
		Pearson		
		Correlation		

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 1, there were statistically significant correlations between the two raters' scores for the writing tests ( $p < .05$ ). The independent-samples t- test was run to see if the differences were statistically significant. The results are in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Independent-Samples Test for the Pretest Scores of Writing of the Control and Experimental Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest Scores	Equal variances assumed	5.34	.02	.653	28	.519	1.700	-3.634	7.034
	Equal variances not assumed			.653	22.50	.521	1.700	-3.694	7.094

The independent-samples t-test procedure compared the means for the control and experimental groups. The findings showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups with respect to their writing ability before introducing the treatment ( $p > .05$ ).

Finally, independent-samples t-test was run to the results of the post-test of writing. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Independent-Samples Test for the writing test (posttest)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Posttest Scores	Equal variances assumed	4.02	.054	2.67	28	.012	5.966	1.389	10.544
	Equal variances not assumed			2.67	22.69	.014	5.96667	1.340	10.592

The independent-sample t-test procedure introduced two tests of the difference between the control and experimental groups. The Levene's statistic tested the equality of the variances. It was found that the significance value of the statistic was equal to .054. Since this value was higher than .05, it could be assumed that the groups had equal variances in posttest and thus the first test was considered.

The results of the descriptive statistics in Table 4.8., revealed that learners' performance in the experimental group ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 18.06$ ) was lower than that of the control group ( $M_{\text{control}} = 24.03$ ) in posttest of writing (mean difference = 5.96, 95% CI: 1.38 to 10.54). The results of the independent-samples t-test for the post-test indicated

that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in their posttest [ $t(28) = 2.67$ ;  $p < .05$ , two-tailed]. The improvement in the mean score for the control group could be related to the explicit feedback that was practiced for the control group. Consequently, explicit feedback was more effective and the null hypothesis was rejected implying that there was statistically significant difference between the effects of implicit and explicit feedback for the writing of the Iranian elementary EFL learners' writing ability.

In a research done by Chandler (2003) over a semester and by providing learners with explicit and implicit feedback in two groups, it has been proved that both explicit correction and simple underlining of errors (implicit correction) were significant. However, he has claimed that direct correction is the best choice for providing accurate revisions, and the students prefer it because it is the fastest and easiest way for all of them as well as the fastest way for teachers over several pieces of writing. The results of the present study are aligned with Chandler (2003) as the explicit corrective feedback was more useful and this kind of feedback helped the learners to understand their errors. In other word direct feedback was completely comprehensible for the learners and that may be one of the reasons for the superiority of explicit corrective feedback on learners' paragraph writing in this study.

With regard to Truscott's claim (2004), the effectiveness of error correction can just be proved when we compare a group which has been provided by sufficient correction with a group that has not received any feedback or received little correction. He also claimed that providing groups with sufficient correction cannot be a good sample for estimating the possible effects of feedback. The settings of the present study are close to the investigation that was done by Truscott, as a group of learners has been provided with correction and explanation while others just faced underlined errors which is little guidance and led them to discovery learning. The findings of the present research are aligned with Truscott (2004), because he believed that correction most likely has small harmful effects on students' ability to write accurately and if corrective feedback has any benefits, they are very small. The results of the present study showed the small harmful effects in the results of the implicit group and little improvement in the results of the control group.

## 6. Conclusion

This research was undertaken to compare the effects of implicit and explicit written corrective feedback on paragraph writing ability of elementary EFL learners and whether these types of correction can enhance learners' paragraph writing ability or not. According to the findings of the study, the participants in the control group, achieved better results in comparison with those in the experimental group.

Nowadays, there is a great number of positive perspectives about corrective feedback among researchers and theorists. The results of this research proved a specific

type of corrective feedback is not always beneficial or either harmful in all contexts or for all the learners.

At last it can be mentioned that, although the corrective feedback has known as a crucial medium in the field of teaching a second or foreign language, the type of corrective feedback should be chosen according to some factors such as the learners' level of proficiency, the type of the activity and skill that teacher decides to correct, learners' mental attitude toward that specific corrective feedback, and so on. For these reasons, teachers should be aware and knowledgeable enough to select the best type of corrective feedback depending on the context of their classes to prevent the unwanted results.

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